

IN DEFENCE OF MARIANNE

by Keith Warsop

SPOHR'S second wife, Marianne, has suffered from a bad press at the hands of scholars and musicologists. As with many other aspects of Spohr's life and music, a viewpoint became so well established that it has been repeated time and time again without deeper consideration of all the facts. But in order to make an unprejudiced evaluation of Spohr, all areas involving him are today undergoing fresh examination and so it is in this essay with Marianne. Instead of positive or negative judgments based on personal inclination or biased reminiscences, we have to look at her role in Spohr's life in the round and in the context of her time. If we do that it is possible to shift the balance from the negative summing up of earlier commentators and onto the centre ground.

The typical reaction to Marianne Spohr can be seen in Herfreid Homburg's view that 'Spohr's character needed intelligently critical argument based on compelling logic; only with this could he realise his creative powers to the full. In this Marianne Pfeiffer could never have taken Dorette Scheidler's place for him. With a good general education she spoke and wrote English and French fluently and she liked reading and music-making. Although she played the piano "very competently", yet she was not (as can be read so often) a pianist and an artist. The dainty, small-hipped, rather pale appearance and the sensible, soft but suspicious, over-sensitive and easily upset character provided a peculiar sight alongside the herculean Spohr. She was boundlessly loyal to him and revered him, his works and deeds with a really Wagnerian passion.' (Homburg 1968, p.47, translated Chris Tutt).

Hartmut Becker is of the opinion that Spohr's later works are in general inferior to the earlier ones and offers this explanation: 'There is a tragic explanation, rooted in the story of the composer's life, for the peculiar discrepancy in the quality of both of the aforementioned groups of Spohr's symphonies. Between 1831 and 1838 Louis Spohr lost his brother, his first wife Dorette and his youngest daughter. These deaths not only robbed him of three especially close relatives, but – in the case of his wife – also of that intellectual, critical sparring partner which was so necessary to his nature.' (Becker 1984, translated Richard Sterling).

Clive Brown, too, follows this line: 'A crucial difference from his first marriage was that whereas Dorette, who had been an equal partner in his early artistic triumphs, had offered Spohr criticism as well as encouragement, Marianne almost inevitably offered him only adulation.' (Brown 1984, p.234).

Marianne Pfeiffer was born in Kassel on 17th June 1807 at which time Spohr was already 23 years old and nearly 18 months into his marriage with Dorette Scheidler. Her father was Dr Burkhard Wilhelm Pfeiffer, a respected Justice of the Kassel High Court of Appeal, and her brother was Carl Pfeiffer, a civil servant in the Kassel administration.

Spohr arrived in Kassel early in 1822 to take up his appointment as Hofkapellmeister for life and the Pfeiffer family soon became part of his circle. In 1826-27 Carl Pfeiffer prepared a libretto based on Ludwig Tieck's novella *Pietro von Abano* for Spohr's pupil Carl Friedrich Curschmann. Spohr saw the libretto, was attracted to the subject himself, persuaded Curschmann to pass it over to him and completed the opera in August 1827.

So began a period of close collaboration between Spohr and the civil servant-poet. Because of Pfeiffer's government position he was not allowed to publish anything so the libretto appeared in print under the pseudonym of Schmidt. In 1829-30 Pfeiffer wrote his next libretto for Spohr,

Der Alchymist, a treatment based on Washington Irving's tale 'The Student of Salamanca', an insert in his volume of sketches *Bracebridge Hall* (1823).

The Pfeiffers and Spohr were united in their enthusiasm for liberal politics and German unity while the composer and his librettist shared an enjoyment of swimming. It was while Carl Pfeiffer was swimming in Kassel's River Fulda on the morning of 31st July 1831 that he suffered a fatal stroke, dying at the early age of 28. The memorial volume of his poems published the following year led to Spohr's inspiration for his programmatic fourth symphony, based on one of the poems, 'Die Weihe der Töne'.

Pfeiffer's death brought Spohr closer to the bereaved father and then on 20th November 1834 the composer himself suffered the most shattering bereavement of his own life when his wife Dorette died. The lonely composer could only gradually get to terms with this disaster through hard work and eventually he felt the need for companionship again.

He had observed Marianne's knowledge of music and skill in playing the piano when she had played the accompaniment at some of the choral concerts of Spohr's St Cecilia Society. Now he saw more of her but admits he had not the courage to propose to her by word of mouth so he did so in writing and was overjoyed when she assented.

The wedding was planned for 3rd January 1836 but nearly did not take place as the Prince failed to send the required permission. Pfeiffer senior had fallen from the Prince's favour since he had persuaded the 1831-32 Kassel parliament to make heavy reductions in the state's military expenditure. The Prince would only give his permission for the marriage after Marianne had signed a bond in which she waived all claim to a future pension.

In all of these circumstances it would be unrealistic to believe that the 28-year-old Marianne could have replaced Dorette as the 'intellectual sparring-partner' of a husband 23 years her senior. As a teenager and young woman she had been accustomed to seeing him as 'the great genius' who associated with her father and her brother. It was therefore only natural that she would have carried into her marriage the hero-worship of their previous relationship. Instead of criticising her for her lack of the qualities which Dorette possessed we should look more positively at which qualities of her own Spohr was to find of benefit.

The first thing was the knowledge of a wider repertoire of piano music and the increased confidence to write significant works involving that instrument. Spohr writes of their first months together: 'From her great ability for reading at sight I was enabled in a short time to play with her not only all that I had previously written for violin and piano but many new things in that style of art which I had not previously known were suggested to me by her. This inspired me with a great desire to try something for once in duets especially written for piano and violin.'

Her sight-reading ability is mentioned again during a visit to Prague where Spohr conducted his opera *Der Berggeist*. 'I played at several private parties, not only quartets but also my sonatas and solo music with my wife's accompaniment who likewise played some quite new compositions of Kittl and Kleinwächter for four hands, in which she displayed great ability and quickness in reading at sight.'

It was Marianne also who suggested the idea of a double symphony on the lines of the double quartets. 'He felt the strongest impulse to write a truly grand orchestral work, if possible in some new and more extended form of the symphony. On the half-jesting reply which she made to him: "If the simple symphony does not give sufficient scope to your creative faculty, then write a double symphony for two orchestras in the style of the double quartet", he seized the suggestion immediately.' So arose the seventh symphony for double orchestra *Irdisches und Göttliches im Menschenleben*, a composition which drew an often-quoted enthusiastic review from Schumann and in the 2001 revised edition of the *New Grove* is selected by Clive Brown in his Spohr article

as standing along with the second and fifth as one of the finest of the composer's symphonies.

Marianne also had a big share in the libretto for Spohr's last opera *Die Kreuzfahrer* of 1843-44, adapted from the 1802 play by August von Kotzebue. Although the libretto is attributed to both of the Spohrs, the composer drew up the outline and laid down the scenic details while Marianne wrote most of the words. In this, she drew out important themes which are consistent with Spohr's views on freedom and responsibility.

On a more mundane level, Marianne provided Spohr with the domestic comfort and companionship he craved, while he also enjoyed a continuing friendship with her father.

After Spohr's death Marianne played an important role in ensuring that his legacy was preserved for posterity, both his music and materials connected with his life. Together with the journalist and publisher Georg Heinrich Wigand, the husband of Spohr's granddaughter Natalie, née Zahn, she prepared the manuscript of Spohr's memoirs for publication as early as 1860-61 and carried out the suggestion of the composer that there were sufficient materials in her letters and diaries for her to complete the story of his life to its end.

It is true that Marianne and Wigand censored and omitted certain parts of the original text, especially those parts which they considered politically sensitive but in view of the hostility towards Spohr in his later years shown by his princely employer they no doubt acted with the best of intentions and perhaps therefore enabled the work to be published at all rather than banned or impounded. They also toned down a few observations by Spohr in an act which we today consider prudish (e.g., altering 'bosom' to 'neck') but which reflected the development of taste during the 19th century. What was acceptable in Spohr's diaries of 1802-03 was no longer so in the 1860s.

Although Folker Göthel's authentic and uncut 1968 *Lebenserinnerungen* edition of Spohr's original 1,119-page manuscript, which reinstated the composer's original title, has superseded the Marianne-Wigand *Autobiography*, the additional 183-page section she put together covering the last 21 years of his life remains an essential and invaluable source for Spohr researchers.

Certainly, she worshipped his memory and did indeed relegate Mozart's bust in his workroom to the floor, promoting one of Spohr himself to pride of place but she preserved many of his unpublished manuscripts and possessions and in selecting his former pupil Carl Rundnagel as the musical arbiter for publication she chose well. Thanks to Rundnagel we have the third and fourth clarinet concertos, the harp trio and a number of other treasures available for performers. She also kept diaries which have been preserved for us and provide great detail about events in Spohr's later life.

Now that a re-valuation of Spohr's later works seems to be under way, let us do justice to Marianne as well and acknowledge her rightful place in the creation of several of them. Under the circumstances in which she became Spohr's second wife she could not hope to match Dorette as his artistic partner but she still did enough to earn our esteem.

Literature

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